

A History of the Bytown Voices

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Casual Glebe remark produces decades of song

By Bob Brocklebank

Glebe Report March 19, 2020

“The King’s Singers are not coming to Ottawa so we will have to make music ourselves” – that declaration was enough to get Janice Gray started. It was 1991 and Janice, a resident of First Avenue and a former music educator in Quebec, sensed an interest in forming a community choir.

A small group of less than a dozen Glebites gathered in Gray’s living room to tackle SATB (four part music – soprano, alto, tenor and bass). It signaled the birth of The Glebe Singers.

The premise for the choir was a community group of amateurs coming together on the basis of enthusiasm rather than by audition. Some knew plenty about music; others could not read a note and were totally dependent on learning their parts by listening to cassette tapes (cutting edge technology of the time).

Concerts were held in local churches at Christmas and in late spring. Members of the choir went carolling in the Glebe, including in the Loeb (now Metro) produce section and in the courtyard of the now-under-reconstruction Fifth Avenue Court.

As the choir grew, rehearsals moved from Gray’s living room to her basement and eventually to St. Giles Church. Ann McNamee was hired as piano accompanist and became a pillar of the Glebe Singers. Not only was she an accomplished musician, she had family ties to Jamaica.

Through her connections and her successful search for seat sales, members of the Glebe Singers travelled in 1995 to Jamaica where they were hosted by members of the National Chorale of Jamaica. This is a chorus of talented vocalists who perform at official ceremonies and also give concerts around the island. A series of exchange visits followed, with the Jamaicans coming to Ottawa and the Canadians going to Kingston, performing together or in separate concerts. Many strong friendships grew out of these visits.

In 1999, the Glebe Singers were faced with a need to change emphasis as it was becoming difficult to recruit enough male singers. There was a split. One group continued as an all-female chorus (or SSA in music terminology). The second group, including men from the Glebe Singers, their spouses/partners and women who preferred SATB singing, ventured to form a successor choir.

The new SATB group convinced McNamee to take up the direction of the Bytown Voices, a name adopted after much discussion. At that time, she was music director at Trinity United Church on Maitland Avenue and arranged for the new choir to practise and perform there. This meant the Glebe members of this new choir had to travel to the “far west” (beyond Bronson).

The exchanges with Jamaica continued – the Canadians showed no hesitation in going to Jamaica in the winter while the Jamaicans preferred to visit Ottawa in late spring or summer. It should be reported that the Canadians held up well in Jamaica but on a sultry late spring evening in Ottawa, it was a Jamaican who fainted from the unbearable heat!

After some five years, a period in which finding men, especially tenors, continued to be an issue, McNamee left the choir after she was recruited to become a faculty member at the Edna Manley School of Music in Kingston, Jamaica. This led the choir to choose Bob Jones as director/conductor. Jones was organist at St. Basil's Church just north of Trinity on Maitland, and he arranged for the Bytown Voices to move to that church for rehearsals and most performances. Over the 10 years Jones led the choir, the membership stabilized and the scarcity of tenors became less of an issue. Jones was also the musical director of St. Luke's Church on Somerset Avenue. This meant some rehearsals were held in that pleasant acoustical space, and choir members learned to appreciate noodle restaurants in Chinatown.

The current director of the Bytown Voices is the dynamic Joan Fearnley, a noted soprano soloist and director of the children's and women's choirs at Notre Dame Cathedral. Under her leadership, with the support of an outstanding accompanist, Carla Klassen, the choir has grown to some 70 singers.

The Bytown Voices remains a non-audition community choir, performing in winter (pre-Christmas) and spring concerts. The choir also frequently entertains at a retirement home, performing some of the works from its most recent public concert. Rehearsals are at St. Basil's Church on Maitland Avenue. The choir normally enjoys a break over the summer months.

The next performance of the Bytown Voices will be April 26 at Woodroffe United Church. This will be a celebration of 21 years in the choir's present form and almost 30 years since it was conceived in the Glebe. The concert, featuring Vivaldi's *Gloria*, will be the first time the Bytown Voices are supported by a small orchestra. While the concert will include a new piece written by a talented young choir member, some of the sheet music from which the Bytown Voices will be singing is stamped "Glebe Singers," recalling the choir's roots.

[Editor's note: This concert has been cancelled due to the cononavirus.]

More information about becoming a member of the Bytown Voices or purchasing concert tickets is found at bytownvoices.com.

Bob Brocklebank is a Glebe resident, former chair of the Glebe Report board and long-time member of the Bytown Voices.